

“The Wager” by Blaise Pascal



Blaise Pascal, Thoemmes

About the author... Early in life Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) pursued interests in physics and mathematics. His theory of conic sections and probability theory are well known; nevertheless, his experimental methodology in physics proved just as influential, especially his research in hydrostatics. His correspondence with Fermat helped establish the foundations of probability theory; his correspondence with Leibniz helped establish the foundations of the calculus. As a result of a harrowing accident, Pascal turned his attention to religion and religious philosophy in the latter part of his life. It seems he was driving a four-in-hand when the two leader horses leaped over the parapet of Neuilly bridge. Pascal's life was saved when the traces broke; he took the accident as a sign to abandon his experimental life and turn to God. The remainder of his life, he carried a piece of parchment describing this incident next to his heart. Fortunately, for mathematics, however, he sinned from time to time, especially, when a few years later, he completed his essay on the cycloid.

About the work... Pascal's *Pensées* reveals a skepticism with respect to natural theology. Pascal pointed out that the most important things in life cannot be known with certainty; even so we must make choices. His deep mysticism and religious commitment is reflective of Christian existentialism, and Pascal's devotional writing is often compared to Søren

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Kierkegaard’s. The *Pensées*¹ remained fragmented devotional pieces until definitively edited and organized fifty years ago.

From the reading...

“Yes but you must wager. It is not optional.”

Ideas of Interest from the *Pensées*

1. According to Pascal, how much can be known about God?
2. Reconstruct Pascal’s wager as carefully as possible.
3. Explain whether you consider Pascal’s wager a proof of God’s existence or not.
4. What major objections can you construct to the wager? Can these objections be countered?
5. Clarify the meaning of Pascal’s sentence, “The heart has its reasons which reason does not know.”

The Reading Selection from *Pensées*

[That God Is]

We know that there is an infinite, and are ignorant of its nature. As we know it to be false that numbers are finite, it is therefore true that there is an infinity in number. But we do not know what it is. It is false that it is even, it is false that it is odd; for the addition of a unit can make no change in its nature. Yet it is a number, and every number is odd or even (this is

1. Blaise Pascal. *Pensées* (1660). Trans. W. F. Trotter. New York: Collier & Son, 1910.

certainly true of every finite number. So we may well know that there is a God without knowing what He is. Is there not one substantial truth, seeing that there are so many things which are not the truth itself?

We know the existence and nature of the finite, because we also are finite and have extension. We know the existence of the infinite, and are ignorant of its nature, because it has extension like us, but not limits like us. But we know neither the existence nor the nature of God, because He has neither extension nor limits.

But by faith we know His existence; in glory we shall know His nature. Now, I have already shown that we may well know the existence of a thing, without knowing its nature.

Let us now speak according to natural lights.² If there is a God, He is infinitely incomprehensible, since, having neither parts nor limits, He has no affinity to us. We are then incapable of knowing either what He is or if He is. This being so, who will dare to undertake the decision of the question? Not we, who have no affinity to Him.

Who then will blame Christians for not being able to give a reason for their belief since they profess a religion for which they cannot give a reason? They declare, in expounding it to the world, that it is a foolishness; and then you complain that they do not prove it! If they proved it, they would not keep their words; it is in lacking proofs, that they are not lacking in sense. "Yes, but although this excuses those who offer it as such, and take away from them the blame of putting it forward without reason, it does not excuse those who receive it." Let us then examine this point, and say, "God is, or He is not" But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separates us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager? According to reason, you can do neither the one thing nor the other; according to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions.

Do not then reprove for error those who have made a choice; for you know nothing about it. "No, but I blame them for having made, not this choice, but a choice; for again both he who chooses heads and he who chooses tails are equally at fault, they are both in the wrong. The true course is not to wager at all."

2. *I.e.*, according to reason. *Ed.*

[The Wager]

—Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked. Which will you choose then; Let us see. Since you must choose, let us see which interests you least. You have two things to lose, the true and the good; and two things to stake, your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to shun, error and misery. Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose. This is one point settled. But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager them without hesitation that He is. “That is very fine. Yes, I must wager; but I may perhaps wager too much.”—Let us see. Since there is an equal risk of gain and of loss, if you had only to gain two lives, instead of one, you might still wager. But if there were three lives to gain, you would have to play (since you are under the necessity of playing), and you would be imprudent, when you are forced to play, not to chance your life to gain three at a game where there is an equal risk of loss and gain. But there is an eternity of life and happiness. And this being so, if there were an infinity of chances, of which one only would be for you, you would still be right in wagering one to win two, and you would act stupidly, being obliged to play, by refusing to stake one life against three at a game in which out of an infinity of chances there is one for you, if there were an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain. But there is here an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain, a chance of gain against a finite number of chances of loss, and what you stake is finite. It is all divided; wherever the infinite is and there is not an infinity of chances of loss against that of gain, there is no time to hesitate, you must give all. And thus, when one is forced to play, he must renounce reason to preserve his life, rather than risk it for infinite gain, as likely to happen as the loss of nothingness.

For it is no use to say it is uncertain if we will gain, and it is certain that we risk, and that the infinite distance between the certainty of what is staked and the uncertainty of what will be gained, equals the finite good which is certainly staked against the uncertain infinite. It is not so, as every player stakes a certainty to gain an uncertainty, and yet he stakes a finite certainty to gain a finite uncertainty, without transgressing against reason. There is not an infinite distance between the certainty staked and the uncertainty of the gain; that is untrue. In truth, there is an infinity between the certainty of gain and the certainty of loss. But the uncertainty of the gain is proportioned to the certainty of the stake according to the proportion of the chances of gain and loss.

From the reading...

“So we may well know that there is a God without knowing what He is.”

Hence it comes that, if there are as many risks on one side as on the other, the course is to play even; and then the certainty of the stake is equal to the uncertainty of the gain, so far is it from the fact that there is an infinite distance between them. And so our proposition is of infinite force, when there is the finite to stake in a game where there are equal risks of gain and of loss, and the infinite to gain. This is demonstrable; and if men are capable of any truths, this is one. “I confess it, I admit it. But still is there no means of seeing the faces of the cards?”—Yes, Scripture and the rest, &c.—“Yes, but I have my hands tied and my mouth closed; I am forced to wager, and am not free. I am not released, and am so made that I cannot believe. What then would you have me do?”

[The Heart Has Its Reasons]

True. But at least learn your inability to believe, since reason brings you to this, and you cannot believe. Endeavor then to convince yourself, not by increase of proofs of God, but by the abatement of your passions. You would like to attain faith, and do not know the way; you would like to cure yourself of unbelief, and ask the remedy for it. Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions. These are people who know the way which you would follow, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believe, taking the holy water, having masses said, &c. Even this will naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness.—“But this is what I am afraid of”—And why? What have you to lose?

But to show you that this leads you there, it is this which will lessen the passions, which are your stumbling—blocks.

The heart has its reasons which reason does not know. We feel it in a thousand things. I say that the heart naturally loves the Universal Being, and also itself naturally, according as it gives itself to them; and it hardens itself against one or the other at its will. You have rejected the one, and

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kept the other. Is it by reason that you love yourself?

It is the heart which experiences God, and not the reason. This, then, is faith; God felt by the heart, not by reason.

From the reading...

“The heart has its reasons which reason does not know.”

Related Ideas

Pascal’s Wager (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pascal-wager>) A thorough examination of the Wager and its objections from the point of view of probability and decision theory.

J. D. Williams, *The Compleat Strategyst: being a primer on the theory of games of strategy*, McGraw-Hill, 1954. A engaging introduction to game-theory (or the mathematics of everyday decisions) requiring only simple algebra and some curiosity to read.



Pascal’s Experimental Apparatus, ©IIHR, University of Iowa

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Pascal writes in this essay:

... there is an infinity in number. But we do not know what it is. It is false that it is even, it is false that it is odd; for the addition of a unit can make no change in its nature. Yet it is a number, and every number is odd or even (this is certainly true of every finite number. So we may well know that there is a God without knowing what He is.

In what sense of the word “exist” is God said to exist? *I.e.* consider the different senses of existence for the following kinds of things: (1) matter, (2) mind, (3) numbers, (4) imaginary numbers, (5) space, and (6) nothing. How the ontological argument for God’s existence related to the problem of existential import in elementary logic?

2. Discuss the following criticism of Pascal’s Wager:

Pascal’s wager suffers from the logical fallacy of false dilemma, relying on the assumption that the only possibilities are:

1. the Christian God exists and punishes or rewards as stated in the Bible, or
2. no God exists.

The wager cannot rule out the possibility that there is a God who instead rewards skepticism and punishes blind faith, or rewards honest reasoning and punishes feigned faith. In societies where faith is often rewarded by economic and social benefit, its potential moral significance is dubious. It also assumes faith costs nothing, but there may be both direct (time, health, wealth) costs and opportunity costs: those who choose to believe in, say, scientific theories that may contradict scripture may be able to discover things and accomplish things the believer could not.³

Is the opportunity cost of belief in any manner comparable with an infinite payoff? Can the false dilemma be avoided by acknowledging the following Hindu belief? Krishna states:

With whatever motive people worship Me, I fulfill their desires accordingly. People worship Me with different motives.⁴

3. Pascal’s Wager (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pascals_wager). *Wikipedia*.

4. *Bhagavad Gita*, § 4.11.

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Would a God who understands the limitations of human reasoning permit any belief which is appropriate to the believer?

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